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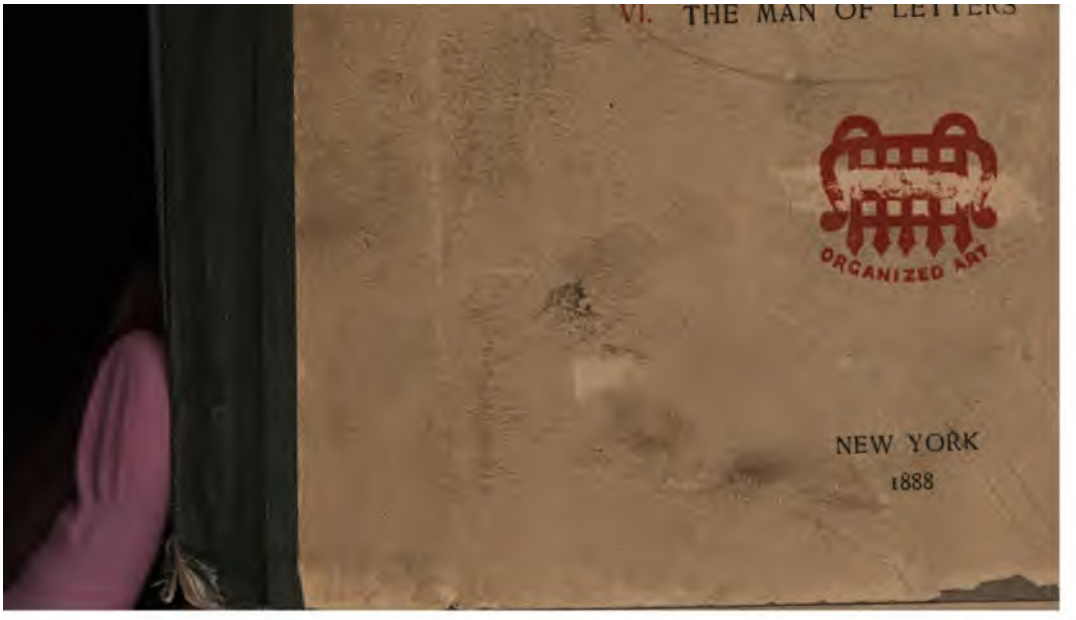
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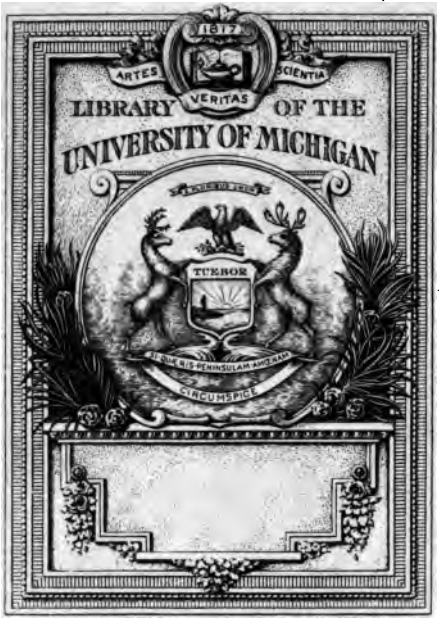
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# ART: A COMMODITY

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BY SHERIDAN FORD

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I. THE MIDDLEMAN

II. MOUNTEBANKS AND PAINT

III. THE VOICE OF THE AUCTIONEER

IV. FORGERY BY BRUSH

V. PICTURE SHOWS AND SHAMS

VI. THE MAN OF LETTERS

NEW YORK:
1888

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By SHERIDAN FORD
1888

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I INSCRIBE
THESE SKETCHES TO
A GROUP OF PAINTERS WHO BEAR
TO-DAY UPON THEIR BRUSH-TIPS THE HONOR
OF

# AMERICAN ART:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| INNESS | TRYON | MURPHY | DEWEY |
| WALKER | WEIR | DEWING | BRUSH |
| CHASE | BLUM | FITZ | MOWBRAY |
| LAFARGE | PEARCE | DAVIS | WHISTLER |
| DANNAT | CURRIER | SARGENT | HARRISON |
| VEDDER | VAIL | MOSLER | ALEXANDER |

THE PICTURE BUSINESS AS DAILY HANDLED SEEMS TO BE MISSING ITS RIGHT AIM AND DEFEATING ITS OWN CHANCES. IN SAD PROPORTION TO ITS BROAD DISTANCES IS ITS PRESENT FOREGROUND CRUDE WITH CONFUSION AND CLAMOR.

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# THE MIDDLEMAN

COMPETITION grows fierce in the New York picture trade. A survey of the field is instructive. In the spring of 1887 a leading Philadelphia house opened an extensive Fifth Avenue branch, and a little earlier a Boston dealer with a twenty years' record of successful sales, closed out his connection at the Hub to locate in the same street. In October, a Paris firm that does the largest picture business in the world opened a New York branch as an experiment, and have since decided to continue permanently. They have begun the construction of a gallery for exhibition purposes. Another Paris house that had experimented here the year before, returned to stay in November, and there is a rumor from London that an old-established Bond Street dealer proposes to take a hand. Meanwhile, half a dozen new shops for the sale of black and white have started in. Among the New York dealers proper the most significant move has been the combination between the Averys and Mr. Ortgies, the auctioneer, and their advent to Murray Hill,—showing that picture shops can move before the book stores, that the auctioneer is becoming more and more the adjunct of the picture dealer, and that the American Art Galleries no longer enjoy a monopoly of select art auctioneering. Should the merry game go on much longer the play of the competitive principle in the field of art will call for closer study.

The rise of the picture trade in the United States dates practically from the civil war. Its growth from small beginnings

has been phenomenal. Superficial students of its development assert that the business is overdone,—a statement counter to all the facts. The truth is that this country, from its latitude, size and conditions, has only fairly entered upon its larger and permanent picture-buying era. All the conditions are making for an increase in the volume of trade, and what has been accomplished but points to the larger prosperity that is to follow. One cannot name a house that has not made money. Even as things are conducted at present the profit margins are enormous.

The American dealer occupies a peculiar place. His position as importer coupled to the vast wealth controlled in this country by careless buyers gives him a prestige that he does not have abroad. There he can furnish collectors little that they cannot get without him, for there it is possible for collectors to deal directly with a greater number of current artists, to attend personally a greater number of noted sales and exhibitions, and there informed buyers outnumber the uninformed. The value of a picture is comparative,—based partly upon a true standard and partly upon a false one. There is a striking similarity between the tricks of the picture market and the stock jobbing methods of Wall Street. Picture dealers work up an artificial demand for the productions of those artists they control and pocket the profits. They "bear" prices on pictures a rival dealer is overstocked with and when they in turn control the supply at once proceed to "bull" them. By misrepresentation and a nimble juggling of facts they unload worthless canvases upon confiding "lambs" after the fashion set by Wall Street with watered stocks.

The average picture collector is deficient in the knowledge of a picture's market value, and oft-times doubtful even as to what is best for him to buy. It is natural, therefore, that at the outset he should cast about with some hesitation, commit innumerable blunders and pay dearly for his inexperience. So much does individual trust and personal magnetism enter into the business that a salesman who has secured the confidence of

a customer has but himself to blame should he forfeit it. There are scores of collectors as willing to accept the word and blindly abide in the judgment of dealers into whose hands they have fallen as was poor old Luther Marsh to receive from an adventuress machine-made daubs as the genuine spirit productions of Raphael and Rembrandt. A New York banker once remarked that there was but one picture house in the world in which he placed complete reliance, and that his faith in them was such that he frequently ordered pictures without either seeing them or knowing their price. Insiders will appreciate the point when told that the house in question is that of Arthur Tooth & Sons of London.

Dealers everywhere understand how largely personal trust enters into their operations and yet, strange to say, in the business of buying and selling pictures the code of ethics or *morale* is less high than that which obtains in the grocery or boot and shoe trades. In these lines the high class stores proceed upon the theory that it pays best to handle the best goods only and at a fixed price. There is not a picture shop to-day in New York City that shapes its tortuous course upon this simple, honest and common sense plan. There is not a shop where the proprietor will not handle with cheerful complacency the cheapest trash if the handling puts money in his pocket. The inquiring mind can easily test the truth of this by a visit to any or all of their establishments. Side by side will be found *chef-d'œuvres* from the hand of a master and unsightly daubs by misguided slaves of the brush,—impotent to advance the cause of art in any way save one, that of quitting her domain forever. If an impressionable millionaire is beguiled into buying a lot of riff-raff from Paris picture shops, the dealer considers that he has done a good stroke of legitimate business. When the victim discovers the imposition as he is sure to do sooner or later, he prefers as a rule, to pocket his chagrin and say nothing than to protest and expose his ignorance. A member of a produce exchange discovered grading No. 2 spring wheat as No. 1, would be expelled

and branded as a swindler. In the picture trade, the man who can take a poor canvas that cost a few hundred dollars, and sell it for several thousand to a customer who believes him honest, is viewed in the light of a shrewd operator.

There is one dealer whose methods have the merit of originality. He has probably done as much to degrade art as any one in the business. Once a year he goes abroad for supplies, and secures them in the following way. In advance of his coming the London and Continental dealers are notified of the dates he expects to reach their doors. Knowing by experience what it means, they make ready to receive him. All the unsold accumulations in their store rooms, all the trash they can lay their hands on, are furbished up, and on arriving he walks through with note book and pencil and makes a gross bid on the lot. No time is wasted discussing merit, authenticity or beauty, and usually the lots are jobbed out to him at practically his own figures. Once here, they are auctioned off in seaboard cities, and the unsold leavings shipped in freight cars without the form of boxing, to remote points in the country, where the exhibition and auction farce is repeated after the customary advertising in the local press. The things are never insured in transit, their value is so slight. In a way this man's methods are more to be commended than the finished deceptions of some of his rivals. Art is a commodity with him and it is nothing else. He has none of the affectation of the average dealer and does not claim any love for art *per se*. Not long ago one of the guild in conversation with me, alluded to his methods, referring in a deprecatory, half apologetic way to the discredit they brought upon the trade. A little later this same sensitive, compassionating soul sold a Rousseau for thirty-eight hundred dollars that he had offered a friend of mine at twenty-seven hundred.

The average picture salesman is refreshing. Once let him conceive that a customer is a fool and the amount of picturesque nonsense he can put forth in a given time staggers belief. The writer once to beguile an idle hour, visited a newly opened gal-

lery and with rustic candor confided to one of the brotherhood that he would like to look over the stock and select a few good foreign examples. Some artless inquiries convinced the young man that so far as pictures went I could with difficulty distinguish between an oil painting and a chromo. As the situation dawned upon him, the way in which he turned himself loose in the wide realm of art was a caution. Among other things displayed for my delectation was a nightmare in oils, for which I implied a fondness. In size it was about five feet by three, and a greater travesty never disfigured the side of a room. The salesman's face at this point was a study.

"It's a pleasure to do business with a gentleman like you," he remarked in a patronizing fashion. "Any one can see that you know pictures. That piece is by one of the greatest artists in Europe."

It was the production of some third-rate Dusseldorf man, hackneyed in subject and composition. The dealer was robbed if he paid two hundred dollars for it. It was offered to me at three thousand. After a full hour of this sort of thing and much that was worse I came away, saying that I wanted to look about before purchasing. I have never returned, though in receipt of a letter from the salesman begging me to do so and saying that "almost any offer for that painting would be entertained." And I should fancy it might be.

One prominent picture house has in its employ a clerk who was written up by the daily press in Chicago for complicity in the attempted sale at that place of fraudulent pictures. His present employers engaged him, it is said, with a full knowledge of his unsavory record. Whether he has seen the error of his former ways and changed them is problematical. At any rate he has changed his name.

Mr. George I. Seney may be taken as one type of American collectors. He is to be sure, an extreme illustration, for the whole country might not afford his fellow. Mr. Seney is a large hearted gentleman who, in the hey-day of his prosperity, scat-

tered dollars in a kingly way for deserving charities. He also invested in pictures, a custom not uncommon with men of sudden wealth. At the beginning of his art career Mr. Seney's mistakes are said to have been a fruitful source of revenue to the dealers whose *morale,* as previously pointed out, is not of such an order as to prevent their asking any price, however preposterous, which they think they can obtain. In other words they gauge the tax by what the traffic will bear. To one canvas in Mr. Seney's first collection a story attaches that illustrates prevailing methods. It was a large piece by Renouf, called "The Helping Hand." The *motif* is a sunny faced little lass trying to aid a weatherbeaten old salt at the oar. The idea is admirable, the faces of the man and child well done but the drawing of the rest of the picture is stilted, the technique lifeless, and the color scheme lacking in feeling. It was brought into the United States by a dealer who was said to have paid the painter something like eighteen hundred dollars, and who passed it on to Mr. Seney at a reported price of twelve thousand. When the fact was brought home to the latter he was naturally indignant. The dealer, who had already netted a swingeing profit at his hands did the only thing possible under the circumstances to placate the customer and continue commercial relations.

"If you are dissatisfied, Mr. Seney," he is reported to have said, "say so and I'll draw a check right here for the purchase price and you may return the canvas."

Mr. Seney characteristically declined the offer, insisting that it was not his custom to break contracts made in good faith. He added that not another dollar of his money should find its way into that dealer's hands, and it never has. When reverses of fortune forced him to part with his collection at auction, "The Helping Hand" was secured by the Corcoran Gallery for seven thousand five hundred dollars, a price in excess of its value. Financial disaster crippled Mr. Seney's art enthusiasm for a time, but of late his affairs having taken a turn for the better, he is said to be buying again with all his former recklessness. I

imagine that when the time comes he will resort once more to the convenient and customary auction channel.

The fetich side of the picture business has been overdone. Some newspaper writers with an eye for sensational effect are fond of reporting phenomenal prices paid for single paintings by millionaires with souls more attuned to coupon clipping than to art. It is small wonder that the uninformed public should gather erroneous impressions from the stories, and come to think that the only pictures worthy the name are the few famous ones in the galleries of the rich; as though a picture's worth could be measured by its money cost or a man's taste by the size of his bank account. In Paris I was once authorized by a compatriot to call upon M. Secretan and offer seventy thousand dollars for Millet's "Angelus,"—which by the way was courteously declined. The Crœsus jokingly confessed to me one evening at the *Lion d'Or*, that so far as he was personally concerned he knew no more about art than a South Sea Islander and cared less. His wife wanted him to secure the "Angelus" for the sake of the notoriety its possession would ensure. This fact was brought out through my efforts to convince him how much might be accomplished toward forming a collection through the intelligent expenditure of such a sum, and the folly of investing it in a single canvas.

The prevalent impression that one must needs be a millionaire to buy pictures has done much to retard their distribution and appreciation. It is part and parcel of that other theory that when a business man begins indulging a taste for art his credits call for rigid scrutiny. The Spencer sales clearly prove that pictures well bought are a good investment. The picture-buying class in the United States is growing in grace and wisdom. Forged canvases are not snapped up with the avidity they once were. The informed collector, before purchasing at a fancy price a work signed with the name of some foreign artist no longer living, has come to expect something more than the unsupported word of an interested dealer as to the picture's pedigree and value.

# MOUNTEBANKS AND PAINT

AFTER all, the test of success with the public is the counting room test. Painters, however, whose work is uncommercial find solace in the thought that futurity will applaud, and it's this that crowds the studios with men who have no right there. Formerly those whose works were unsaleable suffered and waited, not always patiently, till fortune smiled. In these days, here and there, men tired of appealing to time against circumstance, join issue with the many voiced critics of the press and invoke the aid of the showman. Others who have won a partial recognition, restless at results, follow suit. Reading notices come cheap in some papers and printer's ink and posters go a long way toward making reputations of a kind. There are painters who might object to seeing their names in block type on bill-boards alongside those of a circus or the latest dime museum freak, but there are tastes and tastes and variety makes the world go round.

The first special picture exhibition marked the entrance of the mountebank in the art field. It had its beginnings in the single picture show, usually a canvas of monster size. The offshoots and variations have been many, but the underlying principle is the same in each. Mr. Frith, the Royal Academician, in his recently published autobiography, relates how his reputation was exploited with a huge picture through the enterprise and push of a London dealer. Naturally Mr. Frith thinks that the canvas was chiefly responsible for the success of the scheme. The

showman happens to be dead, so that his side of the story is left to the imagination. From this man, whose ingenious methods filled Mr. Frith's pockets and aided to place him on a pinnacle of notoriety, down to the American agent of a French house which purposes starring Benjamin Constant here next autumn on a portrait painting tour, the question as to whose services are the more valuable, the painter's or the showman's, has ever been a debatable one. It is the eternal struggle between the Thing-world and the Thought.

Some say it is the painter's genius, others that it is the showman's push. Of one thing the public, that fickle monster whose indifference saddens and whose smile is fortune, can rest assured. The painter who calls in the services of an advance agent to proclaim his talent and his wares, who values the approval of the judicious less than the dollars of the credulous,—may be a success as that word goes but he is not an artist. The soul of good is not in him.

Special exhibitions as usually handled are but a phase of the general demoralization in the art field. Men like Munkacsy, Piloty and Vereschagen have reached years of discretion and know what they are about. Their game is a golden one and all else secondary. These and such as these would rather be door-keepers in the palaces of Mammon than dwellers in the tents of true art. Business is business, and no sane man will quarrel with them on that score. Were they content to paint and show without recourse to impudent assertion, the writer would be the last to criticise, but the truth is that they babble of their supreme devotion to art when their chief art is but that of the mountebank. How it strains the imagination to picture Millet in the darkest hour of his grim fight for existence, resorting to the methods of the showman.

Many a poor devil of an artist with truth in his soul and want written all over him, marvels why his last salon picture admirable though it may be, remains unsold and unnoticed while imposture thrives apace. So too, at times, men who pay

thousands of dollars for a single canvas of the Barbizon School musingly wonder over their wine why Millet begged bread. I call to mind a young Californian who amid privation and penury worked his way over to Paris and in the salon of '85 had one of the best pictures hung,—certainly by any American. He called it "Repos." It was a low oblong canvas quite seven feet in length, depicting a sandy beach line fringed with sea grass and rising into hillocks. Beyond was the sea, restful and calm and over all a glowing sunset sky. On the beach among the grasses, three or four rude crosses rose to mark some graves, and cut the sea and sky with sharp outline. The sentiment, color and handling were complete and full of genius. The work received scant notice of any kind, and when the salon closed the artist, who had counted on a sale to keep him in food, offered it unsuccessfully to every dealer in Paris for two hundred dollars. Heartbroken he worked his passage back to America, for there was nothing left to pawn.

London is the home of special exhibitions,—permanent, temporary, mixed and individual. All types and grades thrive there as nowhere else at present. In season and out of season the whole year round they tread close upon each other's heels at the dealers and so-called galleries, and are scheduled in advance like theatrical dates. All the known advertising expedients are resorted to; on the one hand none being too costly, on the other, none too common. I have seen a file of fifty "sandwich men" patrolling Pall Mall and Piccadilly to advertise a single show. In the case of permanent exhibitions like the Van Beers or Doré, numbers of these unfortunates are employed the year through. The exhibition feature has been carried so far in the English capital that oft times one cannot make a casual visit to see or price a picture at a dealer's without paying a shilling fee. The show may consist of a few salon canvases, two or three questionable Turners, some intolerable *genre* by nondescript foreigners, or what not. Quality or quantity have little to do with it. A pretext for charging admission is all

that is wanted. One day at Hollender & Cremetti's I had called to price a Troyon when a stalwart, melancholy looking porter of the approved British pattern stopped the way. I explained that I cared nothing for the show, had come on other matters entirely and wouldn't be taxed. He said "I cawn't 'elp it sir, you must pay your shillin' along o' the rest." As I declined to be classed "along o' the rest" he followed inside while I transacted my business and kept a weather eye out to see that I took no unfair advantage.

It is the custom for some artists to visit Canada, New Zealand, India, Australia or the United States and return with fifty or a hundred sketches and pictures. They are without merit for the most part, mere uninteresting illustrations, but when arranged in exhibitions they draw the masses. One New Bond Street gallery holds six or eight exhibitions a year of painters' current work, and from a pecuniary point of view some are quite successful. The firm allows a painter a year or eighteen months or two years to prepare the pictures, according to agreement. He signs legal documents to produce at least forty finished canvases, and cash advances to keep him going are made in total amounts ranging anywhere from twelve hundred dollars to two thousand. The firm pays exhibition and advertising expenses and charges a commission of twenty per cent on sales, pocketing whatever profits accrue from door receipts. The press announcements of one exhibition devoted to "North American scenery" stated that there were "superb views of Niagara and other falls." Fancy a cockney and his sweetheart gazing stolidly at Niagara and going away with the impression that it was only a sample of what can be done over here when it comes to water-falls.

Contrasted with London, special exhibitions in Paris are not so numerous. Dealers there pay much less attention to them, and as a result they more frequently take place under the auspices of the art clubs so common in the French capital. Georges Petit, indulges in specials much oftener than any of the

other dealers. He has superior facilities in the way of location and wall space. The artists execrate Petit although they fear him, for he charges them one hundred dollars a year for representation at his spring exhibitions. One evening at the Beefsteak Club in London, the genial and incomparable Whistler commenting on the practice said: "It does seem as though this man Petit was of a grasping nature that approaches the indecent."

A form of specials unknown outside of Paris is made up of the salacious canvases notoriety hunting artists send to the salon knowing they will be refused, and later on exhibit in some vacant boulevard shop secured for the purpose. It may be noted in passing that the current theory that because a picture has been exhibited in the salon the taint of indecency does not therefore attach to it is laughably erroneous. This was one of the specious but unavailing pleas put forward recently in New York in connection with the arrest and conviction of Knœdler & Co., the largest art dealers in this country, for trafficking in suggestive photographs of salon pictures. A canvas which the salon committee on admission would reject on the score of indecency would be of a character to bring a blush to the cheek of a Zola. One cause for the relatively fewer specials in Paris as compared with London is the wider knowledge of art among the plain people. Then too, the picture market there is more alive and active than at London, for a larger number of foreigners patronize it and the dealers do not need the advertising that results from exhibitions.

Thus far the London custom of charging admission to shops has not obtained to any extent in America. I went over to Philadelphia a while ago to see if there was anything new there and was required to pay a fee of twenty-five cents to look through Mr. Hazeltine's stock. As there was really nothing worth thoughtful attention the charge was in the nature of an imposition. The device is of recent importation and so far as my knowledge extends, is not resorted to by any other American dealer. The American Art Galleries in Madison Square, open

generally day and evening throughout the year, charge a nominal admission fee, but they have yet to announce themselves as dealers and their exhibitions are usually annuals or preliminary to auction sales. The London system of sending artists away to paint with a mortgage on the results has yet to be adopted here. This for various reasons, but chiefly because our men would probably not regard the conditions favorably. Of late American artists, especially those of the older generation have taken to clearing out their studios and realizing by way of a special exhibition, followed by a sale. This would seem to be an indication that though their need of money is as great as that of their foreign brothers, they take a more simple and direct way of overcoming it. The two extremes of specials in this country are well illustrated by the delightful result achieved some years ago through the massing of George Inness' life work in the American Art Galleries, and some products of one Phillipoteaux's brush recently on view in Twenty-third Street.

Artists everywhere will do well to bear in mind that no more effective method was ever devised for assigning a mediocre man his proper place than this of massing his work together. Those who took time to glance through the Kruseman Van Elten and Herman Herzog specials will doubtless appreciate the point. One worthless canvas oft times escapes the censure it deserves, but mediocrity magnified a hundred fold may not hope to pass unchallenged. I never view one of these exhibitions without thinking of the burial service for the dead.

American art has a deal to contend with in the fight to establish itself. Not the least of its troubles are the ill-advised efforts of would-be friends, who want to help a good cause and don't know how. Not long ago Mr. N. E. Montross, a retail dealer in colors, got together sixty-nine pictures by American painters and held an exhibition and sale. The catalogue stated that it was made in pursuance of a desire upon the part of the seller to establish a business in American art. If the announcement was seriously intended, and not a part of the preliminary

flourish attendant on the majority of auctions, then surely the gentleman who made it has a grim sense of humor. Forty-seven painters were represented, but among the lot there were only about a dozen names of the first rank. The rest were second and third-rate men, and in this respect there could be no possible question that the canvases excellently illustrated their inartistic methods and commonplace conceptions. Of those of the first-class it is sufficient to say that they were inadequately represented. George Inness, Tryon, Francis Murphy, Chase, the Morans, Dewey, and Davis, are all capable men of unquestioned talent. And yet one unacquainted with them at their best would have experienced difficulty in assigning them their merited rank after seeing the canvases which a misguided energy had called together. Efforts of the kind are an affront to the intelligence of educated art lovers, and tend to damage the cause they profess to aid.

On a somewhat lower plane is the "Crescent Exhibition" also made up exclusively of American art. The circular appendage to this show likewise credits the projector with a desire to promote the sale of the work of American painters, laments the crying need of a permanent place devoted to that purpose, asserts that "a frivolous impression is abroad that home art can gain no prestige and confer no distinction," points out that the Crescent enterprise "must appeal to every one interested in American art, owing to the almost exclusive patronage which foreign pictures have so steadily had for a round number of years past," and argues that "the idea of the immeasurable superiority of foreign art," can only be controverted by a permanent exhibition of American canvases. The tone of calm confidence which pervades this circular, the cheery way in which the path is blazed to controvert the "frivolous impression of the immeasurable superiority of foreign art," suggest the thought that at last after years of waiting, a prophet has arisen with the ability to surround the task of placing American art on its proper pedestal. I confess that I turned my steps toward

the Crescent with anticipations of a rich treat in store. On entering I was handed a catalogue, a piano advertisement, and a program for some kind of a concert in the building. Fresh from a perusal of the circular advertisement one marvels a bit while turning the pages of the catalogue at not meeting such names as those of Inness, Tryon, Murphy, Dewey, Walker, Weir, Dewing, Brush, Chase, Church, Fitz, Mowbray, La Farge, Pearce, Davis, Whistler, Dannat, Currier, Sargent, Harrison, Vedder, Vail, and Alexander, who in the opinion of many, stand to-day for most that is good in American art. They are not there. With inexcusable apathy they have failed to contribute a canvas. Not a single mother's son of them has rallied round the flag. Not so some others. In patriotic procession Hart, Henry, Dolph, Howland, McCord, Casilear, Parton, Insley, Lippincott, Van Elten, McEntee, Van Boskerk, Bicknell, Bolmer, Minor, Forster, Robbins, Gaul, Weber, Bristol, Freer, Ochtman, and Daniel Huntington,—he of official fame, have nobly responded, and shoulder to shoulder and canvas to canvas "controvert the frivolous idea of the immeasurable superiority of foreign art." The battle is on. Let the effete painters of Europe look to themselves.

The current art of a nation is not a thing to be confined and trifled with, or gauged by every passer-by. It is a living force that grows and changes every hour. Travel, thought, and work are needed to compass and understand it, especially in this country, where size and the additional wide distribution of American artists in Europe, enter so largely into the question. It is a matter of increasing wonderment that self-styled promoters should continue in the idea that American art can be benefited by any permanent exhibition of itself in New York on any plan yet projected. The fact is it has reached beyond the need of any such crystallization. The artists who lend their names and work to these numerous temporary schemes do so rather for the possible sale that may result,—more legitimate means to that end being closed to them, than for any in-

terest or faith in the prospectus of the projector. What would be thought of any such exhibition as the Crescent's in London of English art, or in Paris of French art, with the soberly stated aim of advancing the interests of either? An exhibition advertised as representative, when it is nothing of the kind, is a lie, and therefore hurtful. The place for the exhibition and sale of current American art is in a specially designed room at some well-managed dealer's, where it can take its place and hold it among the art of other countries; the time is all the year round, and the manner is with a tone and independence that no dealer has as yet even dimly foreseen.

The latest tariff act, approved by Congress March 3, 1883, contains a proviso that: "All paintings, statuary, and photographic pictures, imported for exhibition by any association duly authorized under the laws of the United States, or of any State, for the promotion and encouragement of science, art, or industry and not intended for sale, shall be admitted free of duty, under such regulations as the Secretary of the Treasury shall prescribe; but bonds shall be given for the payment to the United States of such duties as may be imposed by law upon any and all such articles as shall not be re-exported within six months after such importation."

The framers of the act did not foresee that this clause might be used as an entering wedge for evading the intent if not the letter of the law. In the case of M. Durand-Ruel, a Paris art dealer, pictures were entered at the New York Custom House for exhibition in the galleries of a duly incorporated association, and the requisite bonds furnished for their safe-keeping and proper return. They were offered for sale in the regular course of the exhibition, with a stipulation that before final delivery to the purchaser they would have to cross and re-cross the ocean and pay the usual duties. Now there was nothing dishonorable in this on the part of M. Durand-Ruel, who is one of the few men in the trade whose integrity has never been called in question. It was an opportunity for him to escape paying duty

on unsalable pictures, and he took advantage of it. In the end the Government got its own and the unsold pictures went back to France to stay. And yet from an equity point of view the proceeding was manifestly unfair to American dealers, who pay duty on all they import and take the risk of selling. Profiting by the example of M. Durand-Ruel the American branch of the Paris house of Boussod, Valadon & Co., has filed articles of incorporation for an association to be known as the Boussod-Valadon Company for the advancement and promotion of art and the interest of artists. The scheme is so thinly veneered as to deceive no one. The announcement of the new move, however, has stirred up the New York dealers. They term it an abuse of the tariff, and have sent a petition to the Secretary of the Treasury stating that there is a practical evasion of the law, and demanding redress. It is difficult to see just how the existing statute can be straightened and still retain the clause covering exhibition pictures. The way out of the tangle is for Congress to abolish the art tariff entirely, something that should have been done long ago. From present indications, however, the outlook for any immediate relief is rather hopeless. At a Democratic caucus held in Washington, May 28, 1888, to consider the Mills Bill, Congressman Holman, of Indiana, proposed and carried an amendment striking out the clause which put works of art on the free list. The sentiment that moved Congressman Cobb of Alabama, in the course of a speech on the Government Botanical Gardens, to ask "of what use are them flowers to me and my constituents," is still potent in our National legislation. It would seem as though "statesmen" of the Cobb and Holman type were dispensations of an inscrutable Providence, sent to chasten a people given over to material, mechanic greatness, and careless of genius and joy.

# THE VOICE OF THE AUCTIONEER

FOR the success of a worthless picture auction three things are essential—some work signed by painters of repute to take the curse off the daubs, liberal press advertising, and fools. It's a far cry from Cedar Street to Murray Hill, and one wonders at times how fourth-rate collections on view there previous to sale should have strayed so far from the neighborhood of the Schencks and the Matthews. Cedar Street is indeed the home of cheap picture auctions. Here dealers bring with reluctance, the "dead stock" that for months has cumbered their store rooms. Here hapless painters send the unsought, soulless fancies that have made the weary round of many spring and autumn exhibitions. Here come the executors of estates whose one time owners had themselves been losing players at the picture auction game. Progressive collectors drift down here too, and offer the mistakes they were deluded into buying at the commencement of their collecting careers.

Apart from the humorous aspect of the perennial comedy, there is its pathetic side. One who has occasion to visit auction rooms from time to time is impressed with the regular and recurring appearance of certain pictures. There is no London policeman to force forward these inanimate bits of canvas, but like poor Joe in Dickens' tale they are always "moving on." They may repose for a brief space in private collections, but they never stay there long. Three years ago I saw a salon picture sold in a Cedar Street shop that had hung in successive exhibi-

tions in London, Chicago, New York and Philadelphia. No one wanted it, and the artist owner least of all. And so it passed under the hammer. I have met my old friend five times since in sundry auction rooms up town and down town. Twice it touched Madison Square, but the fates had decreed that it should not find a permanent resting place, and thus it happens that Cedar street claims it at recurring intervals.

Picture sales up town occur in the evening in the centre of the residence section. Prior to the repeal at Albany of the senseless law against evening auctions the up town trade languished, as brokers and merchants found it inconvenient to attend. It is noteworthy that many buyers who frequent down town auctions help to swell the out of town contingent. Living as they do in adjacent villages, the opportunities offered near their places of business for indulging in art are the only ones, scant as they may be, at their easy command. At these auctions the bidders and bids are a study. The other day I saw a picture by a Brussels painter that was really worth nothing at all, bring four hundred dollars. The buyer, a Stamford, Connecticut man, thought he had a prize. Some water-colors by George Fuller went for eight or nine dollars apiece. A very fair flower study by Miss Greatorex, sold for fourteen dollars. Then some highly colored merchandise evoked spirited competition, spurred on by the mock bidders scattered among the crowd. The auctioneer, loud-voiced and self-satisfied, dwelt at length on the extraordinary value of each picture, the deplorable indifference of his auditors to the opportunities offered, and the need of a wider art culture in the United States. He pronounced Daubigny "Daw-big-ny," Mesgrigny "Mess-grig-ny," and Detaille "De-tailly." A more laughable farce was never witnessed, and properly staged it would insure the success of a comic opera. No one, however, expects much of these auctions and were they not a phase of a wider and more serious art situation they would call for slight notice. The truth is unfortunately that Cedar Street has no monopoly of worthless picture auctions. The

more finished deceptions are up town in the shadow of Madison Square and along the Fifth Avenue. When estimating the shortcomings of the larger and better located establishments it must in fairness be admitted that were merit the only test, little difference could be detected in a comparison between them and their less pretentious rivals.

A few days ago a case came up in the New York Courts touching the appraisal of some objects of art by one of the oldest and most reputable houses in the city, and their professional appraiser was put on the stand. At the outset he led off with the bland assertion that he knew "more about art than the President of the National Academy of Design." A bust of Orestes was under examination. The attorney for the plaintiff wanted to know if Orestes was a male or a female.

"She was a female," answered the appraiser.

"Do you know anything about the Venus de Milo?" queried the lawyer.

He did.

"In your opinion as an art critic or expert, if the Venus de Milo were cracked or had an arm off would it be of less value?"

The witness had never seen a Venus de Milo "unless complete."

"Would you have any opinion of a fine statue if it were cracked?"

He would not.

"How do you form an estimate of a statue?"

This he did by "sounding it to see if it was good material."

"Do you know Corot?" and the witness concluded after a moment's thought that he did not know him personally.

An auction properly understood, is for the purpose of exposing goods at public sale for legitimate competition, the public being supposed to force prices in fair and open rivalry. If the auctioneer takes a position between the public and the seller calculated to prevent this, he betrays his trust. For him to force prices by mock bids or permit the seller to do so, is unfair to say

the least. It is also the auctioneer's duty to oppose and break combinations of purchasers formed to stifle competition. As things are in many instances in the picture auction business, the public who buy are swindled and so are the public who sell. It is a kind of double action machine which can be made to work both ways. No reference is intended to honorable sales like those of the Spencer or Chapman, but to those swindles perpetrated in the name of art by men who know better, on a public that ought to know better, too.

There are picture auctioneers who have constantly on hand or in sight scores of cheap pictures waiting for the advent of genuine private sellers, who, when they appear with their collections, are made convenient dummies for cataloguing trash that could be got rid of in no other way. The process is simple enough. A collector negotiating for a sale is told that his pictures are too few in number to pay for a separate exhibition. The auctioneer mildly suggests that he add a few select works belonging to another amateur who wishes his name withheld, and that by thus combining, results satisfactory to both parties may be reached. The collector's name tops the catalogue as a figure-head, while a casual announcement in lower case type follows to the effect that a few choice examples have been added from the collection of another well-known amateur. Customers at a distance unable to attend personally, are sent catalogues with printed forms for authorizing the auctioneer to bid a certain sum for given works. If it is on record that these out-of-town buyers ever secured a canvas at less than the authorization, one would be glad to know of it.

There's another side to the picture-auction. Some weeks ago a leading Fifth Avenue dealer offered in two installments five hundred paintings, and so far as could be seen did not thereby appreciably diminish his gallery stock. It is an instructive commentary on the pass the picture business in this country has reached when such things can be, and when the whole number contained less than forty pictures worthy the

name. This sale may be taken as a type of many. Their press announcements present a dreary uniformity. All are headed in display type with that word ART, and then comes the usual cast-iron statement that there is "on exhibition an unusually important collection of superb modern paintings by the greatest foreign and American artists." The names of the painters supposed to be represented follow in due form. Scattered among half a hundred such will be found four or five famous ones, the remainder belonging to unknown men or men whom the public would gladly forget. It would naturally be supposed that names of distinction might represent works of merit, and this is where the uninformed public are often deceived. One of the conditions of such sales invariably stipulated in the catalogues is that "any painting, engraving or print is not to be set aside on account of any error in description,"—a thoughtful precaution in numberless cases on the part of the auctioneer. Laughable stress is laid upon the foreign painters' empty titles. Surely, honors are easy abroad. In the catalogue of the five hundred pictures referred to, this is the way Hans Frederick Gude, of Berlin, is described:

**Born at Christiana, March 13th, 1825.**
**Pupil of Andreas Achenbach and the Dusseldorf Academy under Schirmer.**
**Medal in Paris, 1855, Exposition Universelle.**
**Medal, Paris Salon, 1861.**
**Medal, 1867, Exposition Universelle.**
**Hors Concours.**
**Great Gold Medal in Berlin, 1852 and 1860.**
**Grand Gold Medal of Germany, at Weimar, 1861.**
**Medal, Centennial Exposition, Philadelphia, 1876.**
**Chevalier of the Order of St. Olaf of Norway.**
**Chevalier of the Order of the Lion of Zahringen of Bade.**
**Chevalier of the Order of the Red Eagle of Prussia.**
**Chevalier of the Order of Francis Joseph of Austria.**
**Professor of the Dusseldorf Academy of Fine Arts in 1854.**
**Professor of the Grand Ducal Academy of the Fine Arts at Carlsruhe, 1864.**
**Professor and Director of the Master-Atelier for Landscape Painting of the Academy of Berlin, 1880.**
**Member of the Academies of Stockholm, Vienna, Copenhagen, Christiana, Berlin, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague.**

Another artist who can't paint and whom nobody knows, is described as "the illustrious master." Of other unknown men the catalogue contains the astounding intelligence that they have "traveled in Belgium, the Ardennes, on the Rhine, the Moselle, and visited Paris." Others, like Cervi of Rome, are styled "great painters." Of a Brussels artist, who has been turning off unsalable canvases for half a century, the simple and single statement is made that he obtained a medal at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. And so it runs on through a hundred pages. In the midst of these names and these statements Jean François Millet, painter of "The Angelus" and "The Sower" is referred to in connection with one of his simple sketches as having exhibited once upon a time at the Exposition Universelle.

One reason for the success of picture auctions is the weakness inherent in the average American for bargains, or what the French call "occasions." There was recently on exhibition at the Ortgies Gallery a lot of paintings from the unsold accumulations of Mr. T. J. Blakeslee, and Messrs. Reichard & Co., *et al.* The auction came off in due form, and was soberly announced in the daily press as "the first of an annual sale of paintings instituted to inaugurate a new movement. The distinction between this and the accustomed exhibitions and sales is that it is composed of odd lots of various and undeclared ownerships. The burden of deciding on the merits of the different pictures consequently devolves wholly upon the purchasers. This will be accompanied by inevitable hesitation and less confident prices," and so on *ad nauseam.* This is the very latest kink in picture-auctions. Surely, a blind belief in the stupidity and credulity of the art public can go no farther.

Picture auctions by right should be a healthy spot on a diseased price-surface. Many pictures in the Spencer sale shone by the light of an artificial comparison. Many of them were overestimated through the strength of convention. The Spencer sale as a type is one result of the cheap auction type. A better state

of things cannot be brought about without a more even circulation among the picture-producing countries, without more intelligence on the part of native American dealers, without less unintelligible talk about art and what it is and does, and without better facilities for obtaining facts upon all points of the art circle,—facts that have in a large degree been kept in the background and syndicated for certain ends.

Until the picture demand in this country is better understood and the supply markets, including America, handled more intelligently, there will be no relief. This is the largest picture-consuming country in the world, and it has been regarded and treated as such more than is known. American collectors have cause to be thankful that the Continent of Australia is occupying the spare time and attention of English picture dealers, for it saves them from an influx of poor English art. The French, German and Italian dealers have unloaded here for many years through the hands of our importers, while the English dealer has sought the same relief in the neighborhood of New Zealand. One other country—South America—still remains for this pauper picture immigration. Last year a number of Belgian painters and sculptors organized at Buenos Ayres an exposition of works of art which were all sold at high prices. Even now a Paris company is getting together a collection of French pictures and proposes to repeat the experiment. It's strange that so golden an opportunity for speculation has not ere this engaged the energies of some enterprising auction dealer. The South Americans must expect to be tricked at the outset right and left, for our cultured dealers cannot afford to spread abroad a knowledge of art, both good and bad, in that benighted land without taxing the untutored natives for their ignorance as well as for their pictures. If all the "dead stock" on Manhattan Island were bought up at a bargain and shipped off to Rio, phenomenal profits might follow—and what a boon it would be to true art lovers hereabout.

# FORGERY BY BRUSH

THE private galleries of American collectors contain many forged and fraudulent pictures. For the most part they suggest or are copies of the work of modern French artists. Fashion has dictated such a run on the Barbizon school that at times the demand has been far ahead of any legitimate means for supplying it. Partly on fashion's account and also in truth because modern landscape as a special intrinsic art phase has never been treated as these Frenchmen treated it, there has arisen in this country, prone to follow a leader blindly but also prone to love a beautiful thing for its own sake, a dual demand for their work. In art, as in everything else, when demand outstrips supply there are always knaves to trade upon it and fools with long purses to make rascality profitable. Had Diaz or Corot painted all the pictures attributed to them, their days would have been crowded with unremitting toil. France, after all, is but one of the supply markets and no one country can furnish so large a share of the total supply and send good wares. By right the other supply markets should be watched and tapped more intelligently. Unfortunately for the interests of collectors the dealers, season after season, blindly tread the beaten paths of the trade, purchasing with complacency the names that are the fashion whether the work is meritorious or not. In their hunt for the mighty dollar they pursue names with such unwearying pertinacity that no time is left to devote to the work of unrecognized talent. Create a school the peer of the Barbi-

zon and plant it on Manhattan Island, and it is safe to say that the dealers would either sneer at its pretensions or plod on in blissful ignorance of its existence.

The newspapers frequently assert that factories for the production of forged pictures are common in the United States. The charges are not confined to the cheaper class of sensation sheets. Reputable journals of whom one certainly has a right to expect better things, refer to mysterious shops in snug retreats where counterfeits so perfect as to defy detection are turned out with despatch to supply a crying want. Even the staid and phlegmatic New York *Evening Post*, with its weakness for interminable descriptions of revolutionary battle-fields and brooding horror of day-laborers and strikes, has fallen into the fashion. The other day in a labored article on pictures and picture-dealers paraded with all the pomp of editorial dignity and double-leads, it gravely stated that "there is in one of the suburbs of New York a Corot factory from which you can obtain works of this master in any size or in any quantity you please, either by the dozen or the single copy." With a generosity rarely met with in these days of newspaper rivalry, the *Evening Post*, strange as it may seem, claimed no credit for the discovery of the factory but quoted "a leading painter" as authority. Curiosity prompted me to call at the office of the *Post* to learn if possible the name of the painter. The omniscient editor said in answer to courteous inquiries that he did not recall the date of the article's appearance. After I had enlightened him he stated, first, that he did not know the writer's name, second, that the writer was out, and third, that no one knew when he would return. If I'd leave my name I was told that I might possibly hear from them. The incident is instructive as illustrating the methods of some newspapers. Here is a reputable journal that thinks nothing of lightly charging that Corots are being manufactured by the yard in our midst for the gulling of an ignorant public. If true it is the bounden duty of the paper making it to lay bare

the names of the swindlers. If untrue it is a pretty cheap piece of business,—this coining of baseless sensations. I will give my check for a thousand dollars to any charitable institution the *Evening Post* names if it will produce its "leading painter" and he in turn will locate his Corot factory. It is no felony in this country, I am told, to forge a signature to a spurious canvas although the French and Belgian laws take cognizance of such offences. A forged canvas, however, is practically valueless if known to be forged, and the American laws provide for those who convey other people's money into their own pockets by misrepresentation and false pretence. One to whom such acts could be traced merits the treatment society accords to rogues. It may be urged that it is not always easy to establish guilt in matters of the kind. Doubtless, in the case of a single canvas, but it would be vastly more difficult for one having in his possession a score or more of fraudulent Corots, to find a jury of twelve men of average intelligence willing to give him a clean bill of health.

Every other artist and art writer one meets is confident that there are factories in full blast producing fraudulent pictures, but none seem able to locate the places or the workmen. Hoboken, Harlem, or the somewhat vague "suburbs" are specified as the seats of the industry, but as for pinning these imaginative minds down to street numbers and names, one might as well hunt for a needle in a hay-mow. I do not assert that such places do not exist in New York. I simply say that I have never been able to unearth one, and if others have they have managed very successfully to conceal the fact. Numberless artists boast of the facility with which they could paint counterfeit Duprés and Corots if so minded. Usually they are second or third-rate men whose mediocre works linger unsought in the dealers' shops, where they never go save on commission. Once in the Quaker City a landscape painter, whose metallic canvases were even then cumbering the walls of the spring exhibition at the Academy of the Fine Arts, confided to me that he could

turn off imitations so perfect as to challenge detection. I asked him if he happened to have any on hand at the time. He thought he might have one or two at his house, and instanced as a proof of his high principle that he had declined commissions for that sort of thing from an unscrupulous dealer. Later on I was shown one of his Corots, of course unsigned. A collector ignorant enough to attribute it to the painter of poetic poplars could be beguiled into buying a Bierstadt for a Daubigny.

It would be idle to deny that there has been more or less sharp practice going on in so large a picture-consuming country as this, but I maintain that the majority of the counterfeits contained in our galleries were not made here. They have been imported from abroad as genuine examples, invoiced at regular rates, and the chief profit on them has accrued to the foreigners who caused their manufacture, and whose outlay was proportionately inconsiderable. American dealers have much to answer for in various ways, but among those of the higher class the first one has yet, in my judgment, to cause a picture to be forged.

But dealers are human, make mistakes like other mortals, and not infrequently become the dupes of swindlers. I refer now to dealers of the first class. Over those composing the second let us charitably draw the mantle of silence. The peculiar position in which those of the first class sometimes find themselves placed was illustrated by the Seney sale. At that time an art critic attacked in public print the authenticity of five of the pictures composing the collection. The five in question were attributed to Cabanel, Decamps, Daubigny, Turner and Millet. Mr. S. P. Avery had sold them to the collector and to Mr. Avery the public naturally turned for an explanation. His failure to establish conclusive proof of the genuineness of four out of the five created widespread and unfavorable comment at the time. With the exception of the Cabanel none of them could be traced direct to the painter, and in the end Mr. Avery was obliged to

base his authentic gaurantee on presumptive evidence merely. In the course of the controversy Mr. Avery gravely brought forward the fact that the Millet and the Decamps had been bought by him from the Paris dealer Georges Petit, as though that were a point in favor of their genuineness. The trade at the French capital indulged in a broad smile when they heard it. Over there Petit would be about the last person whose opinion on a picture an informed collector would quote, more especially if he had had a finger in the sale. Mr. Seney's case is not an isolated one. Time and again American collectors have been betrayed and swindled by dishonest and ignorant dealers at home and abroad. The notorious case of Cornelius Vanderbilt is a type out of the many where collectors have been robbed in the most unblushing fashion.

When the French novelist Madame Gréville came here on a lecturing tour, her husband, who accompanied her, set about cataloguing the more valuable works of French artists in the public and private galleries of America. M. Gréville himself has stated that ere the work had been fairly entered upon the number of pictures of questionable authenticity that revealed themselves discouraged him in his undertaking and eventually caused him to abandon it entirely. Dealers with interested pockets have done their utmost to decry M. Gréville's abilities as an expert, and question in every way his competency and his honesty. It may interest some of them to learn that the gentleman has now in his possession a mass of facts that if given publicity would cause a sensation such as they have not been treated to for many a day. Once in writing of his tour in the States and visits to picture galleries private and public, M. Gréville said : "To speak frankly, a number of spurious works have remained in the East : one or two Millets, several Corots,—even in well-chosen galleries,—and Diazes without end ! A large number of landscapes and a quarter of the figures attributed to this artist are evidently false, or so doubtful that it amounts to the same thing. On several occasions we timidly ventured to

suggest that a certain work seemed scarcely to be in the usual style of Diaz, and the owner invariably responded, 'I assure you, sir, it is one of his finest!' Once only in the course of our American journey did we encounter a gentleman, the proprietor of a large and beautiful gallery, who asked us to frankly state our opinion concerning the authenticity of his treasures. We left some without names. This was not, however, in the United States, but in Canada. There was not a Diaz in the collection."

It is the business of an honest dealer to refuse to handle pictures of doubtful authenticity, but so many things enter into the question that certainty is quite often impossible. It is an easy matter to write "expert" after one's name and deliver off-hand opinions on doubtful canvases, but when all is said the fact remains that "an opinion is but the theory of an interest." Dealers themselves admit that they cannot vouch for Diaz's work. One Paris expert whose honesty is unquestioned, signed two affidavits within twenty-four hours of each other, one for and the other against the authenticity of a certain canvas, each time firm in the faith that what he said was the truth. Here was a man who in Rousseau's dark-days frequently tided him over temporary chasms of a financial kind. He was thoroughly acquainted with the men of that epoch, their methods and work; if any one living ought by right to be able to pass a competent opinion on the pictures of the Barbizon school he should, and yet he floundered and went wrong in the most ludicrous fashion. Old MM. Dupré and Van Marcke are unable to accurately state the fact regarding their early productions. Once while rummaging through a second-hand shop in the Latin quarter of Paris I came across an unfinished sketch signed J. Dupré. Its genuineness was doubtful, but as the price was trifling I bought it. Business later on took me to see the old gentleman,—the last survivor of an immortal group, and I carried the sketch along. M. Dupré examined it with some feeling, and after a pause pronounced it his own. Now six months had not elapsed before the

fact was established beyond peradventure, through a laughable *contretemps*, that it was the work of a scalawag student at the *Beaux-Arts*. He had sold the product of his talented rascality to the keeper of a café to liquidate an old score and open a new one. The café keeper parted with it to the second-hand dealer and he in turn passed it on to me.

Considering its enormous traffic in art it is small wonder that Paris is the home of picture frauds. The tricks of the trade there are so manifold, and their ways so dark that to detail a tithe of them would make a book of many pages. The markets for unloading are so world wide and the game so profitable, that there are scores of people who make picture swindling a study, treating it as one of the learned professions. One of their many time-worn devices is to rent a magnificent suite of apartments in an old quarter of the city, crowd it with antique furniture and costly bric-à-brac, and line the walls with canvases signed with famous names. Victims invited to see the place are told that it is a rich find, that poverty has forced the owner, a member of the old nobility, to part with his cherished treasures, that there must be no publicity in the newspapers on account of the family name, and so on *ad infinitum*. There is a dealer, whose shop is in the Rue Volney, who conducts his business much like some of our American picture auctioneers do theirs. He handles scores of questionable canvases, but makes it a rule to guarantee nothing. I have known, personally, cases where he has refunded money to purchasers and taken back questionable canvases. He merely shrugs his broad French shoulders and admits that he is finite and liable to err. So far as principle goes, he is a moral idiot. Some of his chance customers live so far away that they lack opportunity to make trouble even if their eyes are eventually opened, which is not always the case, and besides he handles many genuine canvases of undisputed authenticity. In taking account of the opportunities offered a scamp like this, it should be borne in mind that many wealthy foreigners visit Paris only

once in a lifetime, but while there they usually improve their opportunities for art collecting.

M. Bernheim is a Paris picture-dealer who, in 1886, had a De Neuville he wanted to sell. M. Georges Petit, another dealer, called on him and took the picture away to show a customer. In the course of a week he returned it with the statement that it did not suit. A clerk of M. Bernheim's found that the canvas had been removed from the frame, while the signature indicated that it had been traced. Investigation followed and it was learned that Petit had just sold a De Neuville. Called on to explain he said that he had obtained the one sold, from Boussod, Valadon & Co. The latter, indignant, filed a complaint and the municipality of Paris brought suit against Petit, his clerk and Paul Vernon, an artist of unenviable reputation. It was developed at the trial that Petit had sold a De Neuville to Boussod, Valadon & Co., and a week or two later bought it back. The final purchaser could not be produced. He was a foreigner, according to Petit, and had sailed away taking the questionable canvas with him. Of course there could be no conviction on such evidence. It was openly charged at the time that Petit had caused Bernheim's picture to be copied by Paul Vernon, and that the sale to Boussod, Valadon & Co. and subsequent purchase, was merely a part of the plot. Petit escaped the law, but not the tribunal of public opinion.

This is the same Petit whom American dealers enrich with their patronage and whose expert opinions are confidently quoted to doubting collectors on this side the water. In 1884 Petit sold to Dumas *fils* for twelve thousand francs a fascinating canvas signed Corot. He congratulated the famous author of "Diane De Lys" at securing such a gem and blandly pocketed the purchase price with renewed assurances of his distinguished consideration. In the end a barefaced swindle was exposed and the picture traced to the studio of M. Trouillebert, an artist who painted after the manner of the master of the precious landscapes. M. Petit refunded the price and dragged Tedesco

Bros., also dealers, into the controversy. The latter embroiled M. Cordeil and he in turn laid the blame on M. De Reum who preferred to maintain a golden silence. As a Paris journalist writing of the incident at the time remarked, M. De Reum could have declared that he received the picture from the hand of a masked man on a dark autumnal evening and it would have been difficult to prove the contrary. M. Trouillebert's innocence was established, for he had painted the picture in good faith and signed his name to it. After it left his hands the signature of Corot had been substituted. Here were Petit and Tedesco, experts, leading dealers in modern paintings, selling for twelve thousand francs a forgery that cost them four thousand.

The French and English journals were recently flooded with accounts of Jan Van Beers and his picture factory. Van Beers is a painter of unquestioned talent, eccentric and peculiar, a sort of Frenchified-Belgian edition of the irrepressible American Whistler. Unlike Whistler, however, who is always true to his art, Van Beers in his haste for fortune, has resorted to downright fraud. While taking a holiday last August at Ostend, he saw in a shop window four pictures signed with his name. He denounced them as forgeries, called in the police, and a prosecution was begun under a Belgian law passed in 1886 for the protection of artists. At the trial Van Beers swore that three of the pictures were forgeries, admitting the authenticity of the fourth. For the defense, Eisman Semenowsky, a Paris painter, testified that he had worked for years in Van Beers' studio, and had also painted at home for him. He made copies of pictures and sometimes painted pictures of his own, which Van Beers signed and sold, sometimes touching up the work but not always. The four pictures in question he recognized as his. When the forgeries were not successful Van Beers had his own name signed to them by some one else, sometimes even by his servant, in order to be able to repudiate them if necessary. Thus, in speaking of his failures, he was wont to say : "We will make this into a false Van Beers,"—an expression sacred to his studio.

Paul Dewitt, painter, of Paris, testified that eight or nine years ago an association of six painters was formed at the French capital, under Van Beers' direction, of which the sole aim was to manufacture Van Beers'. Placed on the stand, Van Beers denied that he had employed half a dozen painters ; he had only employed MM. Semenowsky, Dewitt, Cogaert and a fourth ; he acknowledged that the picture factory had existed, but maintained that in this respect the practice was common in Continental *ateliers*. The judge in dismissing the case, declared that Van Beers was a swindler convicted of committing forgeries upon his own work.

What a flood of light the story throws on the conditions of modern picture dealing.

# PICTURE SHOWS AND SHAMS

IN Twenty-third Street, New York, just west of Sixth Avenue, stands an unpretentious little two story building. Years ago devout men and women gathered each Sunday within its walls to worship God. As the days came and went and the social centre of the city shifted northward the once fashionable and wealthy congregation fell away. With declining attendance came meagre collections and diminished pew-rents. Debts began to pile up and a mortgage followed. In time matters went the usual way and the property passed into the hands of the money-lenders. The place was tenantless when Salmi Morse, playwright, bohemian and soldier of fortune all round the Globe, came to New York. Backed by abundant capital he transformed it into a theatre and prepared to bring out the Passion Play. Church-going New York stood aggrieved at the news, and a protest went up from every metropolitan pulpit. Committees waited upon the Mayor and asked him to interfere. A license was refused and the case went into the courts where it dragged its tortuous way for weeks. Meanwhile Morse's backers lost heart. Funds gave out, and checkmated at each turn the worn-out old man ended his life in the North River, and his body was washed up by the tide. Then M. Sedelmeyer came over the seas.

M. Sedelmeyer is an art dealer who writes Paris after his name on hotel registers. Aboard the vessel that brought him to this shore was a monster painting styled "Christ Before Pilate."

A cheery crowd of reporters met the dealer and picture down the bay and the little Twenty-third Street theatre had a tenant. That word theatre, however, was incontinently dropped. In its place "The Tabernacle" was substituted, a thoughtful and delicate concession to that portion of the community opposed on principle to theatrical displays.

Amid a blare of newspaper announcements and shrouded in artificial light, the show began. The clergy of New York and near-by cities were courteously invited to attend and criticise the canvas. The majority united in pronouncing it a very soul-stirring and religion-spreading spectacle. Famous divines with well-worn names signed fulsome testimonials setting forth in the glowing and picturesque vocabulary of the press agent, the inestimable benefits that were to accrue to Christendom as a result of the artist's genius and the showman's enterprise. One or two art critics piped a discordant note and condemned with unstinted severity, the claptrap and the humbug. The majority of the daily papers, however, applauded at the regular rates. For a time "The Tabernacle" was the fashion, and the door receipts touched high-water mark. Then public interest flagged a bit, and the outlook for the showman was gloomy. But results proved the mettle he was made of and the fertility of his resource. In a few days it was telegraphed over the United States and cabled to Europe that Mr. John Wanamaker of Philadelphia cheap bargain fame, had bought the picture for one hundred thousand dollars; but, for the education of the public and the great moral good it would accomplish, had charitably consented to allow it to remain on exhibition a few weeks longer. The kindly act added fresh lustre to Mr. Wanamaker's already established fame as a philanthropist. A credulous public started up at the news of the fabulous price, and the show was launched on a triumphant tour through the leading cities. Hundreds of thousands of people gladly gave a half a dollar each for a look at the canvas. In estimating the artistic value of a work of art the public are apt to confuse cost with merit. Few persons were

aware that the picture was reported to have been at one time offered an American dealer for fifteen thousand dollars. It is said to have been invoiced and entered at that figure in the New York Custom House. No one took time to consider that Mr. Wanamaker himself is too shrewd a showman to have paid the amount advertised. It is now stated that the purchase price did not exceed twenty thousand dollars, with a proviso that the showman continue the comedy till the door receipts netted one hundred thousand dollars,—a point so quickly touched and passed that the promoters themselves were astounded. Without the fictitious advertising resulting from the reported sale, without the interest and sentiment centering in a subject so sacred and hallowed, the show would have fallen flat. As it was, the public went into ecstasies over a theatrical canvas that portrayed the Son of Man with the face of a Hebrew fakir. So deftly had the press been handled that the ignorant in paying their money, fancied in a dim, far-off way that they were contributing to the spread of the Gospel. The history of advertising the world over furnishes no instance of a shrewder manipulation of the types. Before bringing the picture across the ocean the showman had exhibited it in the leading cities of Great Britain and the Continent. From facts in my possession as to the pecuniary results here and abroad, his net profits all round may be safely set down at half a million dollars. The record of modern art sales and shows will be searched in vain for a parallel profit on a single canvas.

Spurred on by success the showman followed his first venture with "Christ on Calvary," by the same artist, Munkacsy,—a picture unworthy the name of art and in its treatment entirely removed from any feeling of sympathy with the subject. There were the same surroundings as before,—the dim religious light, the palms, the heat. In conjunction with it and as a sort of side-show, was the "Death of Mozart," also by Munkacsy. The success of the first-named picture has not equalled that of the "Christ Before Pilate," and thus far efforts to dispose of it to

some American millionaire have been unavailing. The Mozart picture has fared better, having been bought by ex-Governor Alger of Michigan, at a reported price of forty-four thousand dollars. As a work of art it is meretricious and theatrical, but neither this nor the fact that the price was five times what the work is worth are of much consequence to the Western statesman. He still has square yards of wall space in his Detroit mansion waiting to be covered, and a ten-million-dollar bank account to draw on. It is said that a Woodward Avenue art dealer in the City of the Straits recently sent him "on approval" a veritable *chef-d'œuvre* by a Russian painter. As a stroke of policy and to secure the Governor for a customer if possible, and thereby open the way for further business, a price was quoted so ridiculously low that there would have been little or no profit on the single transaction. Imagine the dealer's feelings when it was returned with the curt statement that the Governor wasn't buying cheap pictures.

The example set by M. Sedelmeyer soon hatched a swarm of feeble imitators, and since then the atrocities advertised in the name of art have been numerous. First came Piloty's "Wise and Foolish Virgins," and in rapid succession Hans Makart's nude female figures of "The Five Senses," and "Diana and the Wounded Stag"; "The Russian Wedding Feast," and "Choosing the Bride"; "La Justice du Cherif," by Benjamin Constant, portraying half a dozen naked women of the Harem; "The Last Sleigh Ride of King Ludwig"; "The Two Sisters," in which the central figure is a shameless and successful courtesan; Wolf's "Woman Taken in Adultery"; two rival exhibitions of machine-made old masters. and several smaller shows. As the outspoken critic of the New York *Sun* phrases it, "If the intrinsic interest of such works as these were alone in question, it would hardly be needful to criticise them even in the curtest way. But it looks as if our public were not so intelligent as we had fondly begun to believe. It seems ready to swallow the crudest baits, to believe the boldest assertion as to

what is famous, to translate famous as meaning good, and to promise ample patronage to any exhibition which contains a big enough canvas and a sufficiently theatrical *mis-en-scene.*"

Announcements already out convey the depressing intelligence that not only are the Vereschagen barbarities to be inflicted upon a long suffering art community, but as though that were not enough, that M. Vassili Vereschagen himself will take to the lecture platform, and air his free-thinking notions and peculiar art theories in the larger cities of the country. M. Vereschagen is a Russian painter who sprang into a sudden notoriety in the Austrian capital, through the action of the Archbishop of Vienna, in placing under the ban of the Church his pictures relating to Bible scenes. M. Vereschagen thinks Camille Desmoulin's saying that Jesus Christ was the first *sans-culotte,* a true one, and paints his heretical pictures from that standpoint. Coarse blasphemy gains for them an attention their artistic merits never would command. Vereschagen delights also to depict the horrors of war. The crowds at his London exhibition in the autumn of 1887 convinced me that America is not the only country where art imposture flourishes.

There is so much wealth in the United States, the area is so vast, and the people so in need of amusement, that everything combines to make the country an easy prey to the wary speculators who come three thousand miles with anything in the way of a canvas they can lay their hands on. A few years ago the Watts pictures were widely appreciated in New York. Should the celebrated Lenbach portraits of famous men and women of the period be brought here,—and rumor says that they will be, they too would be welcome. These, and such as these, are an education and breathe the true art spirit. It is to be regretted that they are so few and far between. As conditions exist, however, the Continental showman will, on all fair estimates, continue to deplete American pocket-books with sensation pictures of diminishing merit.

# THE MAN OF LETTERS

I STROLLED into the last exhibition of the Society of American Artists one rainy afternoon with two companions,—one an Art Critic the other a Plain Man of the people. The Critic did not fancy the pictures the Plain Man liked, while the latter, ignorant of art jargon seemed restive under the former's rambling theories and self-opinionated judgments. Here two extremes had met. One stood for sophistication in art, while the other with direct and simple vision undistorted by notions of technique or color, voiced in a natural way his honest likes and dislikes. The Critic paused before the "Portrait of a Lady," by Sargent, and commended it, and before Hitchcock's Tulip picture, praising what he termed its wonderful color scheme. The Plain Man thought Sargent's portrait careless, and as for Hitchcock's canvas, was outspoken in his dislike. He said it was too big and tired his eyes, and that the painted squares reminded him less of sun-kissed flowers than of the maps in the dog's-eared geography of his boyhood. The Plain Man is not much of a reader, and so was unaware that the penny-a-liners of the press abroad had raved and cabled over the canvas. The Critic pronounced Kenyon Cox's "Indian Summer" a painstaking study of the nude, and worth attention as illustrating a new phase in American art. Allegorical painting, said the Critic, is certain to grow in favor. The Plain Man professed an inability to determine whether Mr. Cox had taken much pains with it or not, but timorously suggested that the result was in-

sufferably vulgar. He failed to see, he said, why a naked woman should suggest the autumn's fading leaf. A picture by Fitz "In the Fields" pleased the Plain Man, but he thought the artist had not put enough work in it. He liked the subject and the figures; the Plain Man was born on a farm. The Critic said it was a sketchy affair, washed-out and weak. The Plain Man quietly priced Horatio Walker's "Pig-sty;" "Those are pigs," he said, "and no mistake; I'd like to own that picture;" he considered the color perfect, and that it was as fine an example in its way as Knaus' "Drove of Swine" in the Spencer collection,—barring the sunlight and shadow. The Critic complacently pointed out that the subject was displeasing, the color scheme too sombre, and besides there wasn't much to it one way or another. The Plain Man subsided and felt that he had betrayed his ignorance. When he faced "The Indian and the Lily" he recovered, however, and hesitatingly hazarded the opinion that DeForest Brush was a genius, and when at his best not inferior to Gerome. He thought that no American artist browsed within gunshot distance of him in his special line. And the Critic listened patiently with an expression of compassion.

The fetich side of the picture business remains to be written. The collector who buys pictures because he likes them, unmindful of whose name graces the canvas, is the true art lover. The late W. M. Hunt was such a one. In his student days at Paris he purchased from time to time at trifling cost as many works of the Barbizon school as his limited resources allowed. They were not then the fashion, and collectors who pursue names alone had yet to open the purses that have since for their sake, poured out a golden stream. In those early days the prices ranged anywhere from forty francs up. Mr. Hunt belonged to that rare but ever increasing class who buy what they like and like what is good, irrespective of fashion's caprice. The majority of picture collectors are ranged in a herd at the opposite pole, remote and difficult of access, buttressed by isms and shrouded in sophistication. They buy what others bought before them,

or what the dealers and the many-voiced public pronounce good. Were Troyon on earth turning off canvases under another name, they would wait before investing till press and public bestowed their august approval. As late as the last World's Fair in the French capital, the Barbizon school was viewed with comparative indifference by the rank and file of collectors. To-day they jostle elbows to pay inflated prices for even ephemeral sketches.

Coincident with the rise of the artist came the critic, and he came to stay. However he may have been treated at times, or however he may have treated others, since the first one made his initial bow the writers have insisted that they be reckoned with. What with the coldness of the public on the one hand, and incompetent press critics on the other, the pathway of the artist has at times not been a pleasant one. But everywhere and always he has fared infinitely better than the man of letters. The sculptors of ancient Greece and the old Italian painters flourished in purple and fine linen, where the man of letters tramped and starved. To this day successful artists reveal on occasion a lurking scorn for those who write of their work. Even as wealthy parvenus with a condescension born of prowess in the Thing-world regard the painters whose pockets they help to fill, so these in turn view writers—not as equals in the larger sense but rather as necessary evils. In an interview with Sir John Millais printed in the New York *Herald* under date of May 11, 1888, the following statement is attributed to that nobleman who won his title with the brush: "I am much amused at a criticism in one of to-day's papers on my two pieces in the Burne Jones gallery exhibition. The writer was evidently greatly dissatisfied with them. Now, I know when I do good work as well as any one, and I have never done anything better than that 'Last Rose of Summer' to which my friend objects so seriously. I never know quite what to make of critics, and so I seldom read them. One condemns what the other applauds, and half of them are broken-down artists." Sir John is an Englishman who has produced

nothing for a decade or more worthy the promise of his earlier years. With a mediocre talent he unites the income of a prince and the pretensions of a Horace Vernet, and paints sublime pot-boilers for a British public that is pleased to pay as high as eight thousand guineas apiece for them.

New York is America's art centre, and certainly there if anywhere one has a right to expect art critics of the widest range. An inquiry into the present state of things in this direction is suggestive. Among the New York dailies how many employ competent art critics, how many employ incompetent ones, and how many employ none at all? Reversing the order of the inquiry it is found that among morning papers the *Press*, *Star* and *Journal*, and among evening papers the *Telegram*, *News* and *World* contain no critiques worth a passing notice. In the second class among the morning papers come the *Herald*, *Times* and *World*, and among the evening papers the *Post*, *Commercial Advertiser*, *Mail and Express* and *Evening Sun*,—while the morning *Sun* and *Tribune* compose the first class. Time was when the *Sun* under the influence of Mr. Laffan's pen surpassed all other dailies in the breadth and finish of its art work. Mr. Laffan is a capable not to say brilliant critic whose performances are always scholarly and instructive when he cares to make them so. Unfortunately for the cause of good art since he succeeded the late Mr. English as publisher of the *Sun*, another writer has taken to doing articles for its columns that are scarcely calculated to enhance its former reputation. In comparison with Mr. Laffan's occasional contributions, the contrast is painful. The most amazing statements are put forth touching picture sales and shows, arousing curiosity in the mind of the reader as to what imaginative auctioneer or dealer had the hardihood to beguile such a trusting soul. Mr. Hitchcock of the *Tribune*, is a conscientious fair minded man who hews as close to the line as a somewhat restricted knowledge of the complete art area permits. He has devoted so much time to the study of work in black and white that his inquiries in other directions have been a trifle

curtailed. It is worthy of note that his predecessor on the *Tribune*, the veteran Mr. Clarence Cook, was forced off the paper because of his outspoken tendencies. The Di Cesnola mess with its unsavory suggestions has not yet passed out of mind. It would be difficult to find a man more frank than Mr. Cook or one more fearless in the advocacy of what he deems to be right. In discussing art Mr. DeKay of the *Times*, is uninteresting. He has a faculty for discovering the hall-mark of genius in the canvases of certain artists whose work the cultivated pronounce on a par with his narrow judgment. In many instances personal predilections would seem to distort his wider vision. Mr. Van Cleef's articles in the *Herald* are weak and ineffective, without the glimmer of a suggestion to the student of art. His criticisms of the annual exhibitions that call for reflective analysis are dashed off on the approved reportorial pattern. The morning *World* bowls at an Academy exhibition in much the same fashion as it does at a murder or a divorce case. Not much is to be expected of a journal which will boom any sensational picture however vulgar or commonplace if pay for the space is forthcoming. Here is a paper with royal revenues and a Sunday circulation of a quarter million, cheerfully printing columns of rubbish regarding the countless clap-trap picture shows, and stolidly aiming to force it down the throats of its readers as news, when the veriest tyro in the use of the types knows quite as well as Mr. Pulitzer does that there is no honest excuse for suppressing the talismanic *adv.*

The kindergarten school of journalism founded by Mr. Parke Godwin for the benefit of his sons, at the corner of Nassau and Fulton Streets, pays slight attention to men and things in the art world. This is perhaps as it should be. There are three stages in the life of a newspaper,—the hurtful, the innocuous and the useful. The *Commercial Advertiser* manages pretty successfully to pass a placid existence within the unruffled pale of the second classification. Mr. Moran, of the *Mail and Express*, writes impartially, and this is all that can be said in fairness. The *Even-*

*ing Sun* doesn't count. It chirrups in an artless way over productions of the Kruseman Van Elten order and like the optimist of Shakespeare's fancy sees good in pretty much everything. What shall be said of the *Evening Post*—that idol of McAllister's four hundred? Surely in its pages one may find scholarly art criticism. Instead, however, there are dry dissertations and tedious descriptions keyed month after month on a plane of dreary commonplace. A fair specimen of the *Post's* methods was afforded last winter in its treatment of the Hazeltine auction collection. Here was an opportunity for some wholesome writing touching a lot of pictures that for the most part merited condemnation. Did the *Post* take advantage of it? Not at all. It came out with a colorless article that any average reporter might easily have pieced together. There was nothing to shock the sensitive feelings of the dealer or cause him to cancel his advertising contract. This of itself in journalism, as journalism is understood and practiced in certain quarters, calls for not a little finesse. It needs no vigorous imagination to picture a critic,—Heaven save the mark,—tethered to a coil that stretches to a newspaper counting-room. With what puppet quickness he must needs mark time to the measure set by advertiser and publisher to that very catching air of dimes and dollars.

In the periodical press matters are scarcely more satisfactory. The editors of art papers proceed on the theory that the public craves cheap illustration and to this end sacrifice the writer to the lithographer. It does seem as though persons wanting photogravures or inexpensive reproductions of etchings could gratify their desires without recourse to the journalist. Not that the art of the graver may not often supplement in a felicitous fashion that of the writer, but it is certainly not flattering to the intelligence of a reader to give him a picture-book where he looked for a newspaper. The first illustration in an art paper was viewed in the lightof a premium. With the evolution of the thing the letter-press and picture have changed places.

Mr. Clarence Cook and his monthly *The Studio* are having troublous times. The last issue bore the imprint of November, and even then was some weeks overdue. It's a pity. Mr. Cook knows pictures and writes of them in a charming style. Here is a man whose integrity and ability even his foes admit. In trying to write and print the truth about art he has grown steadily poorer and poorer in this world's goods. From the money point of view he would have fared better had he complimented Di Cesnola with a complacent smirk, left certain outspoken criticisms of sundry Academy exhibitions unwritten, and cozened the herd. Publicity is a commodity, but a man with the nerve to deliver the goods *sans* adulteration needs a long purse to begin with, or a soul attuned to poverty and simple ways. The *Art Review* was started as a monthly, but Mr. Kelly the publisher, bunched the last three issues and sent them to press when all three were past due. This was one way to tide over the sunken rocks that skirt the borderland of failure. The illustrations as usual were admirable, and in this respect touched the high water mark of art journalism in America. Mr. Kelly's criticisms are intelligent, and he has the rare knack of making a good paper. The *Art Age* is edited by Mr. Arthur B. Turnure, who seems bent on doing efficient work, but is evidently uncertain how to go about it. Started with the idea of promoting the printer's art the paper has come to pay special attention to architectural matters, and in addition ranges over the entire art field in a more or less superficial fashion. It bears the mark of dilletantism from the title page to the back cover. The *Art Amateur* pays scant attention to pictures and picture dealers. It is made up for the most part of matter suited to the needs of immature maidenhood that delights in painted placques and spoils wholesome china with parodies of fruit and flower. None the less in aiding to beautify the home its influence makes for good. The *Art Interchange* is conducted on the same lines, but with less ability. So far as the picture trade goes, neither of them are factors in the present situation at New York. Cassell's paper, the *Maga-*

*zine of Art*, follows the pattern laid down by English art journals, with a brief *resumé* culled from the dailies of local happenings in and about the metropolis. Its circulation is limited, and its opinions carry little weight. The *Critic*, a literary weekly, serves up a column or two of art *olla podrida* each issue of the regulation sort, innocuous and warranted not to run counter to the prejudices of anybody. It is queer that bright people like the Gilders should not seize the opportunity at their hands and print the art news without fear or favor. It would surely lengthen their subscription list. *Town Topics*, strange as it may seem, is at present handling the local art situation in a very interesting way. One does not altogether fancy, however, digging art information out of a dung-hill.

It would seem indeed on all fair estimates, that among the other lines of criticism handled by the press, Painting fares the poorest. The call is for but a small number of picture critics anyway, and it is not that the right men and women do not exist but rather that they are not in the saddle. The critic has never had a more difficult position to fill than now. Without the power to see and feel, without the power to put himself completely in the place of the man of wealth, without the power to grasp the commercial line, without these he is not entitled to the position of critic at all. With these and with defined purpose, courage, and a ready wit, he is entitled to *report*, and if he does that in the broad and full significance of the word, he will do at present all that can be asked. That word report has a wider meaning than is commonly given it. The *Thought* must be reported as well as the *Thing*, and the position the Thing holds in the Thought-world. Every picture painted and every exhibition hung, exemplifies and portrays a step in one direction or another. A critique printed not long ago in the columns of a London paper placed the versatile and astute charlatan Jan Van Beers on his true plane, with a few keen strokes of the pen. It was headed "Pictures or Tomfoolery," and presented an admirable example of reporting as reporting should be understood. To